Finding Common Ground:

Character Development in Ontario Schools, K–12

June 2008

reach every student

Ontario

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A Call to Action

It is a pleasure to introduce the document *Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K–12*. This document reflects the collaboration of three departments of the Ministry of Education with the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat leading the initiative.

It is important to acknowledge the many schools and boards that already have character development programs. We congratulate them and urge them to take their existing programs to new levels of effectiveness. Their experience and expertise will be invaluable as we build capacity in other school boards so that character development becomes a reality in all Ontario schools.

Consultations were held across the province in the spring of 2007 with the primary purpose of gathering input on the October 2006 discussion paper on character development. This document has now been revised to reflect the perspectives gathered during these consultations.

This initiative is coming at the right time in education in Ontario. There is a sense of optimism for the future of education in the province. Students are improving in their learning and achievement. Character development will make our vision of education truly balanced and holistic as we revisit the foundations of an equitable and inclusive public education – namely, intellectual, character and citizenship development.

This is the time for us to reaffirm our commitment to the potential of our publicly-funded school system to deliver on its promise to educate all students successfully. But it must be recognized that a quality education includes the education of the heart as well as the mind. It includes a focus on the whole person. It means preparing students to be citizens who have empathy and respect for others within our increasingly diverse communities. It also means providing opportunities for students to understand deeply the importance of civic engagement and what it means to be productive citizens in an interdependent world.

Character development is education at its best.

We invite all Ontarians to make character development a foundation of our education system. Our students deserve no less.

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Ontario's Education Commissioner and Senior Advisor to the Minister of Education

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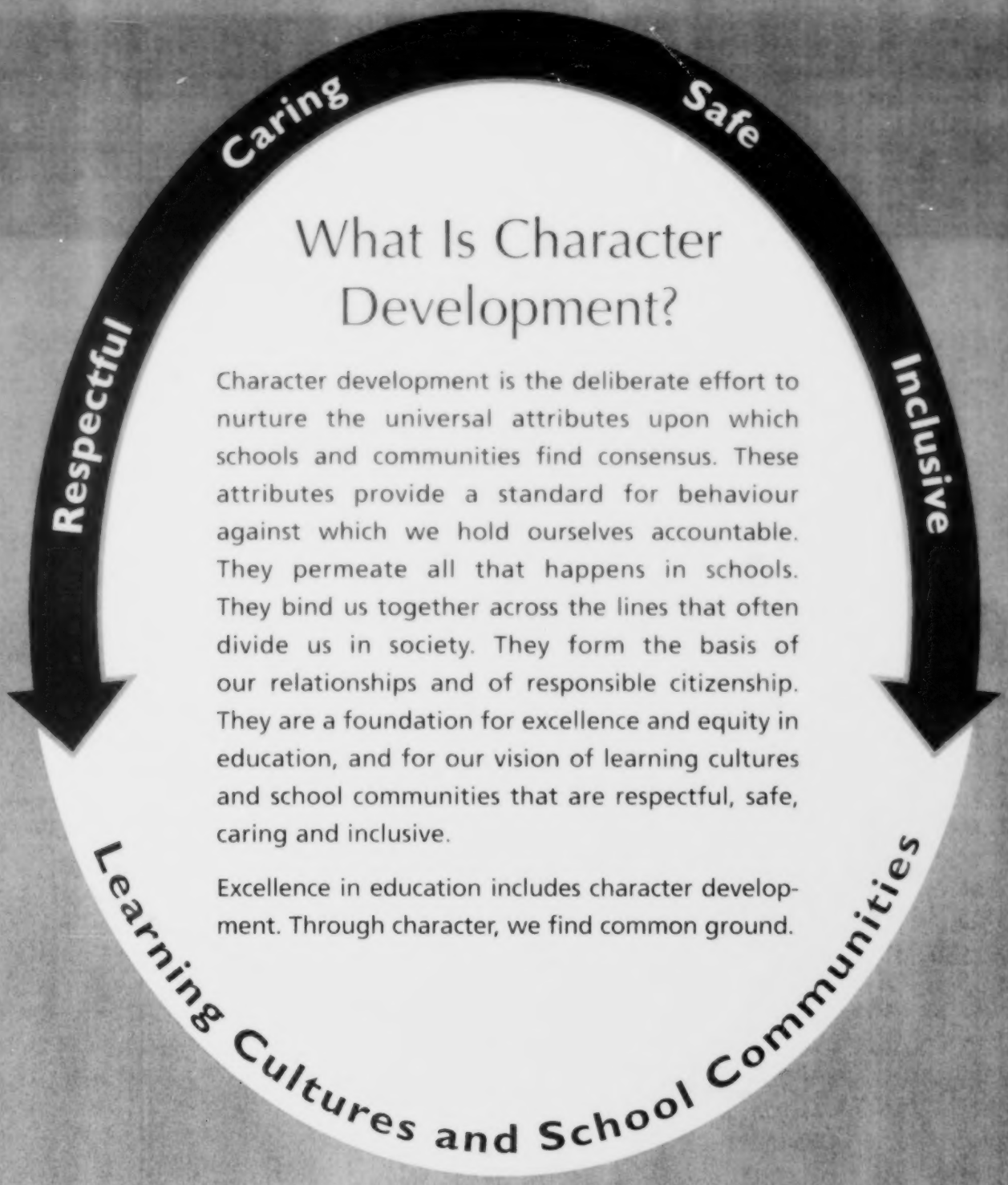

What Is Character Development?

Character development is the deliberate effort to nurture the universal attributes upon which schools and communities find consensus. These attributes provide a standard for behaviour against which we hold ourselves accountable. They permeate all that happens in schools. They bind us together across the lines that often divide us in society. They form the basis of our relationships and of responsible citizenship. They are a foundation for excellence and equity in education, and for our vision of learning cultures and school communities that are respectful, safe, caring and inclusive.

Excellence in education includes character development. Through character, we find common ground.

Key Messages

Ontario's Character Development initiative emphasizes the importance of equitable and inclusive schools in which all students are welcomed and respected, feel a sense of belonging, and are inspired to achieve to the best of their ability. Our focus on reaching every student requires high expectations for all students in learning, academic achievement and citizenship and character development.

- Character development is about excellence in education, communities that are vibrant and caring, and students who will think critically, feel deeply and act wisely.
- A quality education is about more than academic achievement – it is about the development of the whole person.
- Parents and families have the primary responsibility for the development of their children's character, with the support of their school and community.
- Student engagement is essential to all character development processes.
- Ontario teachers and all education workers play a pivotal role in the success of character development in our schools.
- Character development must be a whole-school effort. All members of the school community share the responsibility to model, teach and expect demonstrations of the universal attributes in all school, classroom and extracurricular activities.
- Respect for diversity must be at the heart of our policies, programs, practices and interactions.
- Learning cultures and school communities must be respectful, caring, safe and inclusive.
- Character development must be integrated into the curricular experiences of students and embedded into the culture of the school and classroom in an explicit and intentional manner.
- Character development is not a stand alone initiative; it has linkages with learning and academic achievement, respect for diversity, citizenship development and parent and community partnerships.

Key Beliefs and Principles

The following key beliefs and principles provide the framework for Ontario's Character Development Initiative. They are intended to guide the planning, implementation, and review processes of boards and schools.

A Commitment to Shared Responsibility

1. Character development is a:
   - primary responsibility of parents and families
   - cornerstone of a civil, just and democratic society
   - foundation of our publicly funded education system.

2. Character development must be a whole-school effort. All members of the school community share the responsibility to model, teach and expect demonstrations of the universal attributes in all school, classroom and extracurricular activities.

3. Character development is not a new curriculum. It requires an integrated, cross-curricular approach to learning. It is in everything that we do in schools and is embedded into policies, programs, processes, practices and interactions.

A Commitment to Student Achievement and Engagement

4. Student engagement is essential in the character development process. The meaningful participation and involvement of students is central to the success of the initiative.

5. Character development supports student achievement because it:
   - develops the whole student as an individual, as an engaged learner and as a citizen
   - addresses the cognitive, affective and behavioural domains of learning
   - contributes to respectful, safe, caring and inclusive school environments that are prerequisites for learning
   - creates learning environments that are positive and collaborative so that teachers spend less time disciplining and more time doing what they do best – namely, teaching
   - sets high expectations for learning and behaviour and engages students in sharing the responsibility for their own learning.

6. Character development strives for an ever-growing depth of self-awareness, reflection and understanding. It is not about indoctrination. It is about the development of critical and analytical thinking. It is not about punishment. It is about developing self-discipline. Behavioural consequences are addressed in Codes of Conduct that are mandatory in all Ontario schools.

"Inclusivity is not an option; it is a moral choice that must be made and someone needs to lead the way. Our school has done that, and now we are in a good and peaceful place."

– Nicole Levesque
Chaplain, Ottawa Catholic School Board

A Commitment to Community Building and Equity

7. Character development is about community development. Engaging the community in sharing the responsibility for character development is essential to the success of the initiative.

8. The increasing diversity of Ontario's population creates an opportunity for us to determine the beliefs and principles we hold in common. When school boards engage a wide cross-section of their communities in building consensus on character attributes, they are, in essence, engaged in a process of finding common ground.

9. The principles and attributes of character development are universal, based in equity and transcend differences as well as other demographic factors. Empathy for others and respect for the dignity of all persons are essential characteristics of an inclusive society.

10. The Character Development Initiative upholds and reinforces the tenets of human rights, constitutional rights, and federal and provincial legislation.

"Teaching good character is the responsibility of each and every member of our community. It is about recognizing and exemplifying positive character traits that both our children and we display. Children are our most valuable asset, they are our future. What we chose to invest in our children today is what our world of tomorrow will be."

– Elaine Pavloff Torde
Community member, York Region

What Character Development Is and What It Is Not ...

Ontario's vision of character development must be clearly articulated to ensure that there are common understandings of the key beliefs and principles on which the Character Development Initiative is founded.

The following statements provide an overview of what character development is – and what it is not.

Character development in Ontario schools ...

✓ is about all members of the community sharing the responsibility for supporting students and families in the development of character	✗ is not about schools taking over the responsibility of parents and families
✓ is about critical and analytical thinking, questioning, anticipating problems and contributing to solutions	✗ is not about compliance
✓ is about self-management, self-discipline and the development of interpersonal competencies	✗ is not about behaviour based on a fear of punishment
✓ is about self-awareness, reflection and understanding – doing what's right because it's the right thing to do	✗ is not about behaviours motivated by extrinsic rewards and recognition
✓ is about the development of standards of behaviour against which we hold ourselves accountable	✗ does not seek to indoctrinate
✓ must include the active involvement and engagement of students	✗ cannot be done to students
✓ is a process that develops character in a deliberate and intentional manner through interactions with others and engagement in the wider community	✗ is not found in a textbook, binder or manual
✓ is embedded in all aspects of school life – in its policies, programs, practices, procedures, processes and interactions	✗ is not a new curriculum or an add-on
✓ is about inclusiveness, equity and respect for diversity ✓ is about ensuring that there are opportunities to engage students in general, and disengaged and marginalized students in particular, in the initiative ✓ is about all students and all schools	✗ is not about the "few" or the exclusion of some
✓ is about the universal attributes upon which diverse communities find common ground and is a component of many faith traditions ✓ complements religious and family life education in Catholic schools	✗ is not a form of religious education
✓ is about a process of engagement in which communities come together to build consensus on the values they hold in common	✗ is not about a government imposing a set of moral standards

Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K–12

ENGAGING OUR STUDENTS, OUR SCHOOLS AND OUR COMMUNITIES

Student success is the fundamental measure of an education system. It is the ultimate expression of respect for our students and professional accountability for their achievements. Student success, however, is multidimensional. In addition to academic success, studies indicate that Ontarians share a belief in the need to develop character and to prepare students for their role in society as engaged, productive and responsible participants.

The government has introduced a series of initiatives designed to enhance academic achievement for all students in Ontario's publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools. Through the Character Development Initiative, the government addresses a complementary and equally critical aspect of student success focused on developing the student as a learner, as an individual, as a citizen and as an active member of the school and broader community. The concept of character development is rooted in the belief that parents, schools and communities share the responsibility for, and the benefits of, the development of our young people as empathetic and involved citizens.

This K–12 initiative involves all members of the board, school and community in developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours that students require to become caring and socially responsible members of society. The initiative also affirms the importance of respect as a fundamental characteristic of relationships in Ontario schools.

Students are the centre of our school system. Consequently, they must be active participants in this process. Character development can neither be done to them nor can it be successful without them. The commitment of everyone in the school and community to engaging students in building inclusive school cultures characterized by positive attributes and responsible citizenship is essential to this initiative.

Character cannot be acquired passively, nor can it be delivered solely as units of curriculum.

Character must be developed through active participation and supported by dialogue, reflection and action. The Character Development Initiative is grounded in the vision of an education system in which students play a pivotal role, and are actively engaged in their own learning, in the life of the school and in their communities.

Character development is about citizenship in action.

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Our vision for education in Ontario is one of excellence in academic achievement and the development of both character and the competencies of responsible citizenship. We are committed to *excellence* and *equity*. As the province strives to provide the best possible education for all students, there is a need to transmit from one generation to the next the habits of mind and heart that are necessary for good citizenship to thrive. To this end, the Character Development Initiative, which goes hand in hand with a strong academic program, unifies and strengthens these efforts.

Developing character is a shared responsibility. There is a need for families and schools to work cooperatively to encourage students' learning and maturing as social beings. Students are at the centre of everything that we do. Family and school alliances are necessary to create a web of support for the continuous improvement of our schools.

Our citizens are our province's best asset. They contribute to nation building and to the continued development of a civil society. When schools address the qualities that contribute to the health and well-being of our society, they are, indeed, contributing to the improvement of the world that our students will inherit.

Character development, when fully implemented, permeates the entire life of the school. It is woven into policies, programs, practices, procedures, processes and interactions. It is a way of life. It recognizes that a respectful, caring, safe and inclusive school climate enhances learning.

Schools cannot do this alone. Everyone who works or volunteers in our schools or has a vested interest in the quality of our education system and in the calibre of our graduates has a part to play in the success of character development initiatives. For that reason, we call upon all partners in education – students, teachers, principals, supervisory officers, parents, guardians, secretaries, custodians, school council members, bus drivers, trustees, business and community leaders, members of social service agencies and faith communities to join with us in nurturing the best of the human and universal qualities that our graduates need to be successful in our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

We believe in the potential of our students to be responsible members of our communities and in their ability to demonstrate the universal values that we espouse as a society. We want our schools to continue to be safe models of effective relationships where students learn about and put into practice attributes such as respect, responsibility, fairness and empathy. We want students to develop self-discipline and the personal management skills that will make their communities and workplaces the best that they can be.

Together we can make this happen.

EDUCATION AT ITS BEST

A quality education is not only geared towards the intellect, but also towards attitudes, behaviours, dispositions and sensibilities. It emphasizes all aspects of the self and domains of learning – the cognitive, affective, attitudinal and behavioural. It is about the education of the whole person. Character development, which encompasses all these domains, is a fundamental goal of education in Ontario.

Many studies, such as *The Schools We Need* (2003), highlight the importance parents place on character development while building strong foundational skills in literacy, numeracy and critical thinking. According to this study, one of the highest priority for parents is for schools to help students develop as responsible citizens and to learn how to make ethical decisions.

Another Ontario research study reinforces the finding that, indeed, parents are concerned about the character development of their children. In the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Mary Ann Evans and her colleagues at the University of Guelph reported on their comprehensive 2004 study, *Beginning Reading: The Views of Parents and Teachers of Young Children*, in which parents who were representative of the demographics of south western Ontario were surveyed. Parents were presented with nine domains of learning and asked to rate the importance of each in preparing their children for the future. Parents consistently rated character development as a high priority.

Preparing students for the workplace is also an important goal of education. The *Ontario Skills Passport* (OSP 2007), based on extensive research and consultation by Human Resources and Social Development Canada, and Ontario's Ministry of Education, identifies Essential Skills and important work habits that are used in virtually all occupations. Inherent to these are characteristics such as reliability, responsibility, integrity, initiative and respect. This is reinforced by the perspectives of Canadian employers in the *Employability Skills Profile* by the Conference Board of Canada (2000). It states that personal management skills such as honesty, adaptability and respect for diversity are essential for students entering the workplace.

Daniel Goleman's research on *Emotional Intelligence* (1996), and *Social Intelligence* (2006) states that Emotional Quotient (EQ) is more important than Intelligence Quotient (IQ) in determining success in school and in life. His writing emphasizes the importance of social and emotional literacy, which he describes as the ability to identify, manage and express one's emotions in a mature and conscientious manner. These literacies improve students' academic achievement and overall school performance. Canadian studies (Parker 2003; Parker et al., 2004) support these research findings.

The *Early School Leavers* report (2005), based on the voices of Ontario youth, identifies the primary protective factors for keeping students successfully engaged in school as "forms of alternative schooling, caring teachers, self-determination and insight". The three key recommendations from the report are to, "be more understanding, be more flexible, and be more proactive in reaching out to youth, families and communities". Dr. Bruce Ferguson, co-author of the report, summarizes this in his advice to teachers: "Just care."

Howard Gardner (1999), another seminal researcher in the field of education, developed the Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Intelligences are two of the eight "intelligences" that he identifies as contributing to effective learning and life functioning.

These researchers agree that characteristics such as respect and empathy form the basis of interpersonal understanding and effective relationships.

"Mounting research shows that students who feel connected to school – to teachers, to other students, to the school itself – do better academically."

– Daniel Goleman (2006)

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Character development is the deliberate effort to nurture the universal attributes upon which schools and communities find consensus. These attributes provide a standard for behaviour against which we hold ourselves accountable. They permeate all that happens in schools. They bind us together across the lines that often divide us in society. They form the basis of our relationships and of responsible citizenship. They are a foundation for excellence and equity in education, and for our vision of learning cultures and school communities that are respectful, safe, caring and inclusive.

Excellence in education includes character development. Through character, we find common ground.

Character development in Ontario schools is a deliberate and intentional process. All relationships, experiences and interactions are opportunities for the explicit nurturing of character attributes. It is critical that the attributes that form the basis of character development initiatives are identified through a board process of consultation with diverse communities. Through this process, communities identify the qualities which schools should foster through systematic and intentional practices and processes.

Studies in character education have demonstrated that, when implemented on a school-wide basis, positive results and improvements are realized in the following areas:

- student engagement, motivation and achievement
- self-discipline, pro-social behaviour and interpersonal relationships
- equity and respect for diversity
- preparation for the workplace
- school culture, civility and feelings of safety
- school community partnerships
- volunteer activities
- civic engagement
- engagement in social justice issues

Formal and informal character development initiatives currently exist in a variety of forms across Ontario. Many boards and schools have implemented character development as a key component of their priorities. Character development is clearly evident in initiatives that address areas such as respectful and accessible workplaces, environmental awareness and protection, restorative practices, local and global health initiatives, athletic codes of conduct, student-led conferences and student leadership development. A growing number of boards have also developed curriculum resource documents that explicitly link curriculum content and expectations across subject areas to character development.

The quality of the relationships in schools is an integral factor in creating cultures that transform buildings into caring and engaging learning environments. Learning involves individuals other than teachers, students and administrators. All those with whom students interact contribute to their education. Volunteers, school-based social service workers, classroom and school support staff, and bus drivers – all those who work and volunteer in our schools are part of the wider learning curriculum. From a welcoming "Good morning", to respectful listening and guidance in difficult situations – students learn powerful lessons about what it means to be a caring person of character from the adults around them.

Teachers play a key role in the character development of students. When students reflect upon their education they frequently identify a teacher as the single most important factor in their success in life. Exemplary teachers have always fostered positive attributes, explicitly and implicitly, in their classrooms. They model high expectations in academics and behaviour, develop relationship skills and attitudes, integrate qualities such as honesty and fairness into lessons, and organize their classrooms to reflect principles of inclusion and engagement. The relationships that teachers forge with students build school and classroom environments that support learning and character development.

In their 2004 research, Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson and Wahlstrom states that:

> *"Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school."*

School leadership is instrumental in creating a culture and climate that supports student learning. The principal, along with staff, students and parents, establishes the expectations, practices and processes that define both the operations of the school and the quality of the relationships that create the sense of caring and belonging that students need to succeed.

School leaders inspire, articulate and set the example of the school's character vision. They are intentional in their pursuit of a learning environment that develops the whole person; they make the attributes explicit through action.

Effective leaders have always worked with students, staff and parents to create trusting relationships that respect and encourage academic learning, character development, student engagement, equity of outcome for all students. They include the voices of all members of the diverse educational community.

The Character Development Initiative supports student involvement in building and extending positive, caring school and community cultures. It recognizes the importance of mentoring relationships between students and caring adults. It aligns with curriculum at both the elementary and secondary levels, offering many opportunities for teachers to embed, integrate and include character attributes in the curriculum and in the culture of the school and community. Overall, it prepares students for citizenship and civic involvement and to be fully engaged, responsible members of their communities.

Trustees play an important role in education in Ontario. They represent democracy in action and are the eyes and ears of their communities. In our publicly-funded education system, trustees carry forward the hopes and aspirations that parents and communities have for their children and youth. They ensure that the education provided is of the highest quality and that the goals of the school board are comprehensive and inclusive. It is the role of trustees to translate parental and community expectations into a concrete plan of action for the students in their board. Trustees play an essential role in the community engagement process. They exercise stewardship in ensuring that excellence in academic achievement, equity of outcome, respect for diversity and the key principles of character development are embedded in the strategies that they establish for their school boards.

"For students, the school environment is a precursor to the role they will fulfill in society. We need to develop students who care about one another, who respect the incredible gift of diversity and who want to contribute to make their schools better. The Ontario Character Development Initiative is leading us in the right direction."

– Janet Wilkinson
Director of Education,
Keewatin-Patricia District School Board

In all Ontario publicly-funded boards – English and French, Catholic and public – character development addresses the whole student as an individual, as a learner and as an engaged citizen. It strives to prepare students for community and work with attributes that business and community leaders have identified as essential such as honesty and responsibility. It strives to create the relationships, experiences and culture in which all students can learn, thrive and succeed.

In all French-language schools, civic engagement provides an important conduit for students to affirm, celebrate and enrich their francophone culture and identity. The government's Aménagement linguistique policy stresses the importance of building students' leadership skills, encouraging their involvement in cultural and intercultural activities, initiating school-community projects that involve a cultural element, integrating cultural experiences into the daily life of the classroom and school and creating meaningful networks among all partners in education, including students, schools and communities.

This initiative, along with the Politique d'amenagement Policy, should assist all students in developing a solid personal identity as well as a feeling of belonging to a strong francophone cultural community, all the while preparing them to contribute to the improvement of the wider, interdependent human community.

– Suzanne Moncion
Superintendent of Education
Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario

English Catholic education is founded on the basis of inculcating Catholic values. Historically, Catholic education has stressed community involvement as an important means for students to put beliefs into practice. The Catholic School Graduate Expectations, developed by The Institute for Catholic

Education (1998), describe the life roles, knowledge, skills and attitudes the Catholic community holds for its students.

"The Catholic Character and Culture initiative brings an explicit focus on character development to our call to form our students in their faith and educate them to become citizens of the world who can transform it into a more just and loving society."

– Michael Schmitt
Director of Education, Lakeshore and Algonguin Catholic District School Board

The mission statement for French-language Catholic schools adopted by the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops (OCCB) was developed following a province-wide consultation with parents, teachers, secondary students, school administrators and school boards. The document, *L'école catholique de langue française* (2005), sets out a clear vision for French-language Catholic schools.

"The mission of French Language Catholic Schools is to allow students to acquire extensive knowledge and most of all extensive values. These Christian values, rooted in the tradition of the Catholic Church, are also human values which are accepted across the world. Through the discovery of the richness of their Catholic heritage, our students are encouraged to use their time and talents towards caring for their neighbors and thus becoming engaged citizens, responsible and open to the world."

– Bernard Lavallée
Director of Education
Conseil scolaire de district catholique Centre-Sud

There are strong connections between existing character development programs and the teachings of our Aboriginal peoples – First Nations, Metis and Inuit cultures. Their teachings are interwoven through life, and include respect, honesty, bravery, truth, wisdom and love.

An explicit focus on these and other teachings promotes harmony and enhances positive interactions in our schools and communities. When students learn about the traditions and beliefs of others in their school communities, they gain an understanding of and respect for differences. Aboriginal perspectives must be honoured in the development of implementation plans for the Character Development Initiative.

Aboriginal peoples are the descendents of the original inhabitants of North America and have unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. Their common link is their indigenous ancestry.

Ontario First Nations, Metis and Inuit Policy Framework

Finding Common Ground: Essential Elements

Learning and academic achievement, respect for diversity, citizenship development and parent and community partnerships are all essential to the character development initiative. Each contributes to the development of character and to students' educational experience.

These essential elements cannot exist in isolation, or solely in policies, practices and programs. They are linked together and enhance one another, forming the foundation of character development. Together, they create the conditions for respectful, safe, caring, inclusive learning cultures.

Character development provides students with tools for increasing academic achievement and for building a solid foundation for thoughtful decision-making and problem-solving. Students will use these skills to influence positive outcomes in their lives and across the elements of the initiative.

School communities must value differences in learning styles, student ways of knowing, and the contributions of all members of their learning community. This ensures the success of every student, regardless of ability or disability, special education needs or other factors. Character development is central to ensuring that all students reach their potential. Positive learning environments encourage peer-to-peer support, mutual respect and inclusion, and the development of character attributes such as optimism and perseverance. Active student engagement within such learning environments will provide a strong foundation for the skills, knowledge and attitudes that all students, particularly those with special education needs, require to both succeed and excel in achieving their goals.

There is a growing body of research evidence that character development and greater student engagement in the life of the school are linked closely to academic achievement. In fact, Douglas Willms of New Brunswick's Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy advocates that "we need to consider student engagement as an important schooling outcome in its own right" (2002). A study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2003), which examined data from 42 nations, concluded that one in five students in Canada has a low sense of belonging at school. This results in lower academic achievement during the schooling years, and often leads to continued difficulty in adulthood.

The Character Development Initiative is pivotal in creating and sustaining school environments characterized by high expectations for learning and high levels of student engagement. There are four pillars of the Student Success / Learning to 18 Initiative; the first three are literacy, numeracy and pathways. The 4th Pillar, Community, Culture and Caring, provides an essential avenue that leads to higher levels of student success. This pillar focuses on supporting school cultures that develop a sense of community and caring relationships to provide all students with greater opportunities to achieve success. Community, Culture and Caring connect students to school, support relationships that will engage students, especially those who are disengaged from school, and promote student mentoring and advocacy.

Character attributes such as honesty and integrity provide students with high standards for behaviour, for making decisions that are personally empowering and for creating quality relationships. This translates ethical knowledge, skills and attitudes into action.

Ontario's growing diversity provides our students with a rich opportunity to explore and develop the attitudes and the interpersonal and community-building skills that a mature democracy demands.

Today's students need to function effectively in our diverse society and in our global economy. With increasing ethnocultural and racial diversity the need to find common ground based on our values and beliefs, in communities and as a province, takes on greater significance. Building consensus on what we hold in common is essential for the development of peaceful communities and enduring relationships.

The Character Development Initiative will provide a powerful means to facilitate student growth and development in the context of our diverse schools and communities. Character can neither be taught in the abstract, nor as a course of study. Students develop character through their interactions with others in their diverse classrooms and communities. Qualities such as empathy are best nurtured through relationships that cross the lines that often divide people in society.

We want our schools, our communities, our province, our nation and our world to embody the qualities of effective relationships. The Character Development Initiative brings together the essential elements that individuals and society need in order to achieve excellence in all facets of life.

Ultimately, we want our students to think critically, feel deeply and act wisely.

LEARNING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Academic achievement within a culture of high expectations for learning for all students, from all backgrounds and circumstances, remains the primary responsibility of schools. A number of research findings have identified strong linkages among character development, the creation of caring and engaging school cultures and improvements in student achievement.

Expectations of students in our changing society include high levels of learning competencies. In addition, new competencies are required in areas such as environmental responsibility, global awareness, economic astuteness, social responsibility, technological proficiency and areas that help us cope with emerging opportunities and challenges. Learning to meet these critical expectations will prepare and empower our students to be full participants in their education and in their communities.

In an information-rich, knowledge-based society, ethical principles are needed to guide decision making for the common good. Ontarians want our schools to prepare students for the responsibility that this entails. High standards and high expectations are essential components of a quality education. There is also a world-wide focus on higher levels of literacy. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) document entitled Literacy as Freedom (2006) states that:

> *"Literacy is one of the fundamental instruments of freedom. In today's world the use of written communication is embedded in socio-political and economic systems at local, national and global levels. It is part of the way institutions function and is a key to learning opportunities."*

Participation in today's democratic processes in all spheres of life and in our schools, our communities, our province, our nation and, indeed, our world requires a growing complexity of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours.

The government has made improvement in publicly-funded education the centre-piece of its mandate. Its vision is of an education system that excels provincially, nationally and internationally. It also recognizes that education is about more than academics; education must develop the human qualities that create vibrant and inclusive communities.

Debates about the key purposes of education have persisted over the years. A variety of perspectives converge on the belief that schools serve multiple purposes, with academic achievement as a primary responsibility. Other purposes are shared among schools, all stakeholders and community members.

Engaging students as active participants in the learning process and providing relevant programs and supports are essential for academic achievement. Research tells us that when character development initiatives are implemented well they are multifaceted in nature. Further, DeWit, McKee, Fjeld and Karioja (2003), in their Ontario study of 22 schools, clearly establish the strong link between the quality of teacher-student relationships and academic achievement and behaviour. The social, emotional and academic aspects of classrooms have a direct impact on learning. Trust, a sense of belonging and active engagement create an environment that engenders success. This substantiates what all educators know – that student social and emotional engagement and academic success are intertwined. The common saying, "I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care" speaks to the importance of the strong teacher-student relationships that underlie academic success.

Curriculum documents for Ontario's public education system currently provide teachers with expectations that are geared towards social, interpersonal and citizenship development. The civics, social studies and guidance programs are cases in point. The Kindergarten to Grade 12 document, *Choices into Action: Guidance and Career Education Program Policy for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools* (1999), for example, emphasizes student development, interpersonal development and career development. The document states:

> *"Students will learn to demonstrate self-discipline, take responsibility for their own behaviour, acquire the knowledge and skills required for getting along with others both within and beyond school, and choose ways of interacting positively with others in a variety of situations. They will also learn about thoughtful and non-violent problem-resolution, social responsibility, working cooperatively with others and caring about others."*

Examples abound in curriculum documents. All include expectations related to the responsibility of schools to develop positive character attributes as an integral part of students' education.

Excellence in education includes character development.

RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

The Character Development Initiative upholds human rights. Ontario schools are communities in which students develop the respect for diversity that is the foundation of all positive human relationships. Respectful interactions validate the unique identity of each individual and all members of our diverse communities. Through character development and equity initiatives, students learn the respect, empathy and sense of fairness necessary to ensure the fundamental human rights of all people. Character development reinforces the need for students to demonstrate their commitment to these issues and to be strong advocates in defending the rights of others.

Whereas policies, legislation and programs define the scope and expectations of equity initiatives, character development provides motivation and brings humanity to the implementation of equity initiatives.

When character development includes a strong respect for diversity, students become attuned, not only to that which they have in common with others but also to their own humanity. Respect for the dignity of all people is an essential characteristic of our society.

In the future, our citizenry will continue to be increasingly diverse. People come to Canada, and particularly our province, from around the globe. Ontarians represent the world in miniature. Their perspectives, cultures and world views enrich the fabric of our society and provide deep opportunities for all people to develop the attributes that ensure integration and inclusion. They also require us to find unity and a common bond within our diversity through the values we hold in common. These values will provide a focus for developing equitable and inclusive schools.

A civil and compassionate society has, at its core, both respect and empathy. These qualities extend from one person to another and form the basis of positive and enduring relationships that create the human connectedness necessary for social cohesion and for both individuals and society to thrive.

Respect for fundamental human rights and the inherent dignity of all persons is integral to the school cultures and the society we envision. Our schools must be proactive in ensuring that all biases and barriers that threaten the ability to learn, grow and contribute are removed. All members of our school communities must model and embody the highest regard for relationships characterized by respect for diversity.

The multiple perspectives that exist within our communities demonstrate the need for school boards to be increasingly responsive to the needs and aspirations of their diverse communities. The community consultations on character development conducted by Ontario school boards are expected to follow inclusive processes to ensure that diverse perspectives are heard and included. This ensures that groups from all walks of life achieve consensus on the universal attributes and provide on-going input into their board's character development initiative.

The Early School Leavers Report (2005) comes to the following conclusion:

> *"With our increasing diversity, there is a growing need to find common ground on the values we share. It is essential that issues of power, equity and social differences are properly addressed. The development of an inclusive school environment results in a process of schooling that is not only more relevant for social and minority youth, but enhances the overall scope of the entire curriculum for all students."*

A culture of character and equity in Ontario schools means that respect for diversity must be at the heart of our policies, programs, practices and interactions. This culture includes every child; eliminates barriers; involves the broad community; and builds, enhances, and aligns with existing initiatives. It is the foundation of excellence in education.

When all members of our school communities commit to creating cultures in which character and equity permeate everything they do, we create the inclusive culture that must characterize all Ontario schools. Schooling remains one of the few commonly shared experiences with the potential to bring students from diverse backgrounds together to forge common understandings of the kind of society they wish to create.

Respect for students from diverse backgrounds is reinforced through a commitment to equity of outcome and converges on student achievement. Equity and excellence are two sides of the same coin and are evident in student achievement. Boards and schools committed to equity of outcome for all students have common practices, such as:

- the establishment of high expectations for all students
- the differentiation of curriculum and instruction
- the accommodation of diverse learning styles
- a regard for diversity as a strength
- outreach to vulnerable students and those who may feel marginalized

Education has a moral imperative. When we prepare students for responsible citizenship we are also fostering responsible stewardship. The qualities we nurture in our students today will contribute to and enrich the quality of their relationships and human interactions.

When expectations arise from commonly shared values, and when common understandings are embedded in the culture of our classrooms, we experience teaching and learning at their best. Our quest for character and commitment to equity and excellence must be relentless. They unlock the full potential of inclusive education.

CITIZENSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Character development is an avenue through which students develop respect for self, others, property, the environment, diversity, human rights and other attributes upon which we find common ground as Canadians. It creates and expands opportunities for students to learn about, analyze, question, and contribute to, the building of their communities, our nation and the world. They develop an understanding of the interconnectedness and linkages that underlie social cohesion. Citizenship development is a deliberate effort to nurture these democratic ideals.

It is important that we engender the ideals of democratic citizenship in our students. Citizenship is a responsibility as well as a right. Rights include the freedom to express beliefs and work and live in environments free from discriminatory practices. Along with these rights comes the responsibility to support equitable and democratic processes within our schools, our communities, our province and our nation. As citizens, we work hard to maintain and improve the educational, environmental, cultural, economic, political and social aspects of our society. Citizenship is a privilege that we must not take for granted.

Our publicly-funded schools are committed to inspiring and engaging our students' idealism and enthusiasm in understanding, critically analyzing and practicing the democratic processes. Through curriculum such as language, mathematics, social studies, The Arts, and more specifically, Grade 10 Civics and Canadian History, Grade 11 Law, and Grade 12 World Issues, students are learning positive and pro-social concepts of ideal citizenship. Through service learning, students have opportunities to experience both the need for and rewards of building community. Through increased participation in board and school committees and initiatives, students learn to share in constructive decision-making. Through leadership experiences, students act upon their principles and gain insights into how their decisions impact on the lives of others.

Ontario has a graduation requirement of forty hours of community involvement activities. A large proportion of Ontario students exceed this expectation in their service to their communities. Their strong sense of volunteerism is nurtured through these activities. Civic engagement is an important component of education for citizenship. It also provides opportunities to develop competencies and connectedness between our students and their schools and communities. Service learning provides safe environments to learn and practice the skills and knowledge required to take on greater opportunities and challenges in the future. It can also invoke in our students the joy of giving, sharing, building, and understanding themselves in the context of a caring society.

Increased opportunities for involvement in leadership in the classroom, in schools, in the board and in the community develop many of the skills required for positive and effective participation as citizens in schools and communities. In these contexts, the Character Development Initiative challenges students to:

- make principled decisions
- think critically about their world
- anticipate problems and contribute to solutions
- develop higher levels of personal and social responsibility.

Developing an understanding of how organizations function, how decisions are made and the importance of casting one's vote are vital to students' education and to their future roles as engaged citizens.

Student leadership should not be limited to the few; each and every student in our schools should have opportunities for leadership. It may be through acts of courage such as letting the teacher know that bullying is occurring, or through acts of compassion such as taking the lead in educating other students about street children. It may be in group work and cooperative learning in the classroom, in making positive suggestions for improving the learning environment or in mediating a conflict. Student leadership also involves civic engagement, participation in decisions about their education and service learning. It is learning the skills of positive advocacy for themselves and for others.

Active student engagement in learning, civic participation, service to others and leadership roles requires the development of knowledge, skills and character attributes. The research of Althof and Berkowitz (2006) affirms the interconnectedness of these elements. It states that ideas in this field converge on the notion that competent, engaged and effective citizenship is necessary for a full political, economic, social and cultural partnership. This requires a set of citizenship competencies that include:

- a strong knowledge of civics and governance
- critical-thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills
- communication, social and participatory skills
- an understanding of and commitment to character development.

These strands of competent citizenship can be taught and practiced in classrooms and in schools in partnerships with communities. This requires adult and student commitment to character building in all facets of learning.

Understanding their communities and how events and circumstances impact on people and environments gives students a window to the world. They need a continuum of opportunities to discover what it means to be a citizen. These range from recognizing the daily behaviours that make our world a better place, to taking responsibility for others in need, exercising their right to vote, and taking action on issues of justice. Schools must take a leading role in citizenship development as students assume increasingly important responsibilities for the improvement of their communities.

"Character development has shaped who I am today. It's made me realize that my voice is important; that I need to be involved in what's happening and that I can make a difference."

– Kristen Duncan
Grade 12 student, Peel District School Board

PARENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Parents and families have the primary responsibility for the character development of their children. Families strive to model and reinforce positive attributes on a daily basis. They find ways to ensure that the attributes are taught explicitly, making sure that over time, there is continuity in their development. The success of the character development initiative is dependent on the meaningful engagement of parents and community partners and the linkages forged together.

Community members and organizations, business, local government, and faith communities work collaboratively with schools to share this important responsibility. Character development is an integral part of many youth, sports and community-based programs. It is nurtured in cooperative education and work-experience programs that reflect the call from the business community for schools to develop well-rounded individuals capable of thriving in a global economy.

Partnerships must involve all members of school communities in creating cultures that reinforce the social and emotional knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours that students require to become caring and socially responsible citizens.

Parents can support character development initiatives at all stages of their children's development from Kindergarten to Grade 12, in a variety of ways including:

- serving as positive role models at home, at school and in the community
- reading to and with their children, followed by reflective discussions about the characters in the stories and the values they demonstrate
- nurturing the development of qualities such as empathy and respect for others in interpersonal relationships
- talking with their children about character attributes and how they apply to situations at home and in the community
- teaching the skills children need to make sound decisions and to determine how their actions impact on others
- contributing to and supporting character development initiatives in their children's school.

The community can support character development initiatives in schools in a variety of ways including:

- forming partnerships with local schools
- implementing a character development initiative in their workplace
- providing youth with extracurricular and civic engagement opportunities
- contributing to and supporting the character development initiatives in their local schools.

Schools must seek out alliances among parents and community partners to support learning and character development. There are numerous community organizations that share this responsibility with schools and families. These alliances create a web of support for children and youth and help to provide the foundation upon which educators build.

When we work together, we build strong communities that support our shared goals for our children and youth.

"We need character development in our schools and in our businesses – what you do and what you say have to match. When our students develop strength of character they'll be able to reason out or talk to someone about whatever comes at them."

– Candace LaFrance
Parent, Keewatin-Patricia District School Board

Implementing Character Development

The Character Development Initiative was launched in October, 2006 at a provincial symposium attended by educators, students, parents, trustees and community members. Following the symposium, Character Development Resource Teams were established across the province to support school boards with their implementation planning. In the spring of 2007, consultation sessions were held across the province to share additional information about character development and gather input on the elements of the initiative and on implementation plans. The input collected is reflected in this document.

School boards in Ontario began the implementation of the Character Development Initiative during the 2007–08 school year.

Many school boards have already developed and implemented programs which address aspects of character development. For these boards, the initiative provides an opportunity to add depth to existing programs.

KEY EXPECTATIONS

The primary responsibility for the implementation of the Character Development Initiative resides with school boards. They are expected to demonstrate evidence of the following in their implementation:

1. a collaborative board-based process to engage a diverse cross-section of the community in the development, implementation and review of the initiative
2. the selection of attributes through a board process of community consensus building
3. a board-wide and school-wide commitment to model, teach and expect demonstrations of these attributes in all school, classroom and extracurricular activities
4. student leadership development and expanded opportunities for student voice and engagement in the education process and in their communities
5. character development practices that are holistic in their approach and that reflect the academic, social and emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural domains of learning
6. board and school plans with a deliberate focus on character development and alignment with other ministry documents and expectations, for example: *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*; *Aménagement linguistique, A Policy for Ontario's French-Language Schools and Francophone Community*; the forthcoming *Equity Strategy and Action Plan*; *Choices into Action*; Safe Schools and Student Success initiatives
7. the infusion of character development into the policies, programs, practices, procedures and interactions in the board and schools
8. the collection of baseline and ongoing data regarding the implementation and impact of the initiative on areas such as student achievement, graduation rates, attendance, student leadership, student behaviour, student engagement in the learning process, school culture and student involvement in their communities.

"Over the years, character development has made a significant impact on our schools. We started by working with the community to determine what character development should look like. It was a truly inclusive process in which we involved our students, staff, parents and community. I believe that the support that we have for character development in York Region is a result of the strong community consultation process upon which our program was built. Community engagement certainly plays a pivotal role in the success of character development."

– Bill Hogarth
Director of Education,
York Region District School Board

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION SUPPORT

The Provincial Character Development Resource Teams

Character Development Resource Teams have been established across the province to support all English and French, Catholic and public school boards. Team leaders are experienced in the implementation and extension of character development programs.

Resources

The document entitled *Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K–12*, is located on the Ministry of Education website at www.edu.gov.on.ca. Character development information will be posted regularly on this site along with updates on the work and structure of the Character Development Resource Teams. Links to character development electronic resources and event highlights will also be provided.

Support documents such as *Character Development in Action: Successful Practices, K–12*, and research to support practice will be shared with educators and posted on the Ministry website. Educators will also be encouraged to share implementation and teaching strategies through their Resource Teams and Ministry contacts.

KEY ACTIONS TO DATE

- consulted with 26 selected boards to identify effective implementation practices and collect input regarding implementation requirements and challenges June, 2006
- convened a Provincial Symposium to build awareness and common understanding of the key principles of the provincial Character Development Initiative October, 2006
- produced a webcast for the education sector to support the Character Development Initiative December, 2006
- established Character Development Resource Teams to share successful practices and provide leadership for school boards in implementing and extending their character development initiative December, 2006
- provided school boards with incentive funding and supports to initiate or expand upon their character development initiatives January, 2007
- conducted fifteen regional forums to engage parents, community and business organizations and the education sector in sharing responsibility for the initiative February through June, 2007
- provided school boards with nine capacity building sessions for Board Character Teams, Student Achievement Officers and Student Success Leaders to enable them to provide support for schools as they initiate, or expand upon, their character development initiatives April through June, 2007
- released the document entitled *Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K–12* to provide direction for the initiative June, 2008
- release the document entitled *Character Development in Action: Successful Practices in Ontario Schools, K–12* to support implementation and planning Fall, 2008

Roles and Responsibilities

The following summarizes the roles the Ministry of Education, school boards, schools, teachers, all board and school staff and students will play in making this initiative a reality.

Ministry of Education

The ministry will:

- coordinate and provide leadership for the work of the Provincial Character Development Resource Teams
- provide school boards with start-up funding and supports to initiate or expand their character development initiatives
- produce resources, such as webcasts and examples of successful practices, to support implementation and extension of the initiative
- develop guidelines for data collection and analysis for determining the success of the initiative at the board level
- conduct research and monitor the effectiveness of the implementation and impact of the initiative at the provincial level

School Boards

School boards will:

- collaborate with their Provincial Character Development Resource Team to develop the processes and practices necessary for successful implementation
- establish a collaborative board-based process for engaging students, staff, parents and school councils, as well as a diverse cross-section of business and community representatives, in the development, implementation and review of their initiative, with local trustees playing a key role
- ensure that students play a key role at all stages of the development of this initiative
- establish a culture of respect for diversity through policies, processes, practices, and interactions
- provide the knowledge, skills and leadership development required for students to take on their expanded roles effectively
- promote the character attributes agreed upon by the community in their workplace practices and interactions
- ensure that their character development initiative is aligned with and becomes an integral part of Board and School Improvement Plans
- provide a key role for school councils to play in reaching out to and engaging community members in this initiative
- expand access to, and opportunities for, student engagement in their learning environments
- expand access to, and opportunities for, civic engagement and citizenship development of all students
- partner with parents, community and local organizations to provide programs that further engage students in the community
- monitor and collect data on the effectiveness of their board's character development initiative.

School Principals

Principals will:

- model the character attributes agreed upon by the community in their workplace practices and interactions with others
- provide leadership in the implementation and development of the character development initiative in their school
- ensure that all members of the school community – students, teachers, parents and support staff – are engaged in school-wide implementation and development of the initiative
- ensure that student leadership reflects the diversity of the school population, and that students provide meaningful input into plans and decisions regarding the initiative
- ensure that there are opportunities to engage students in general, and disengaged and marginalized students in particular, in the initiative
- provide the knowledge, skills and leadership development required for students to take on their expanded roles effectively
- ensure that the character development initiative is aligned with and becomes an integral part of the School Improvement Plan
- provide professional learning opportunities for members of the school community in the area of character development
- ensure that character development is embedded in all subject areas and in all classrooms, extracurricular and school-wide programs
- expand access to, and opportunities for, student voice and engagement in their learning environments
- expand access to, and opportunities for, civic engagement and citizenship development of all students
- provide a key role for school councils to play in reaching out to and engaging community members in this initiative
- partner with parents, community and local organizations to provide programs that further engage students in the community
- monitor and collect data on the effectiveness of the character development initiative.

"A culture of learning in a classroom is based on respect. Tolerance or acceptance of others is not enough. Respect involves all students – all that they are, have experienced, and have to offer – including those who challenge or disturb us and those from whom we learn. It starts with respectful and trusting relationships – we have to know what this looks like. We teach respect by modelling; this is the greatest of all lessons and it has to be in place before learning in areas such as literacy and numeracy can happen.

Character development needs to be part of everything we do. It has made me a more respectful person, a more respectful teacher. This is a wonderful journey that we're on together."

– Dan Celetti
Teacher, Algoma District School Board

Teachers

Teachers will:

- model the character attributes agreed upon in the board-based community consultation process in their workplace practices and interactions
- continue to engage students in the creation of a classroom learning environment that is collaborative, caring and characterized by high expectations for learning and equity of outcome
- provide the knowledge, skills and leadership development required for students to take on their expanded roles effectively
- assist in creating a school culture that values caring relationships between teachers and students, fosters a sense of belonging, nurtures democratic principles and encourages student voice in decision making
- use the attributes identified in Ontario Curriculum and other ministry documents and by local communities in the development of classroom behavioural expectations in collaboration with students
- embed character development in their subject areas and in all classrooms, extracurricular and school-wide programs.

All Board and School Staff

All staff will:

- model the character attributes agreed upon by the community in their workplace practices and interactions
- assist in creating school and board cultures that value positive relationships, service excellence and equity.

Students

Students will:

- contribute in meaningful ways to the development of plans and decisions for the implementation of the character development initiative in their school
- include diverse members of their population in the daily life of the school: students who are disengaged, vulnerable and who may feel marginalized
- seek opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to expand their roles in their classrooms, schools, boards, and communities
- encourage all students to become involved in leadership development opportunities
- demonstrate their concern for others by responding to issues of social justice in their schools and local communities and contributing to their solutions
- seek opportunities for meaningful local community involvement, civic engagement and citizenship development.

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